Entrevista à Professora Doutora Brenda Laca

Interview with Professor Brenda Laca

A Professora Doutora Brenda Laca é Licenciada em Letras pela Faculdade de Humanidades e Ciências da Universidade da República, no Uruguai e Doutora em Linguística Geral e Românica pela Universidade de Tubinga, na Alemanha. Atualmente é professora titular no Departamento Romanístico e de Espanhol da Faculdade de Humanidades e Ciências da Educação da Universidade da República do Uruguai. Foi Professora Catedrática nas Universidades de Estrasburgo (1994-1998) e Paris 8 (1998-2018) e dirigiu numerosos projetos de investigação. Interessa-se pela semântica das categorias gramaticais e pela variação linguística e seus limites. Nos últimos vinte anos, a Professora Doutora Brenda Laca trabalhou sobre a expressão gramatical do tempo e da modalidade, publicando numerosos artigos e dirigindo três livros sobre essa temática. Fez contribuições em três gramáticas de referência das línguas românicas: *Gramática descriptiva de la lengua española* (1999), *Gramàtica del català contemporani* (2002) e *Grande grammaire du français* (2021), colaborando, ainda, na elaboração da *Nova Gramática da Língua Española* (2009). A 11 de maio de 2022, a Professora Doutora Brenda Laca foi escolhida para ocupar o *Sillón José Enrique Rodó*, tomando posse a 15 de junho de 2022. Recentemente, a 1 de junho de 2023, na cerimónia de ingresso na Academia Nacional de Letras, discursou sobre "*El futuro y la incertidumbre*".

A entrevista à Professora Doutora Brenda Laca realizou-se no dia 28 de novembro de 2022, no Centro de Linguística da Universidade do Porto (CLUP), decorrente da presença da Senhora Professora no *InSemantiC*, um congresso internacional de Semântica organizado em homenagem à Professora Doutora Fátima Oliveira (FLUP). A entrevista foi preparada pelos estudantes Ana Fidelis, Fábio Granja, Marina Salimon, Tatiana Moura e Violeta Magalhães, sendo conduzida pelas estudantes Inês Cantante, Rute Rebouças e Violeta Magalhães. Posteriormente, foi transcrita pelos mesmos estudantes que prepararam esta entrevista. A equipa editorial agradece muito à Professora Brenda Laca a magnífica oportunidade concedida e o momento de aprendizagem e partilha de conhecimento que nos proporcionou.

First of all, we would like to thank you very much for having accepted our invitation to be here today with us. It is a great pleasure and, surely, a great opportunity for all of us. I would start with the first question which is the following: you have been studying Linguistics, at least, since your B.A.. Could you share with us when and why your predilection for the study of language started?

Okay, well, before answering the question I have to thank you very much for having me here and for having prepared these very well-informed and very thoughtful questions. A lot of work on your part went into it and I am very thankful for that. As for how I came to study Linguistics… I think this sort of experience is shared by many linguists who do not have any information about what Linguistics is and sometimes, by virtue of a chance encounter, of a chance meeting or their happening to find a book, they discover Linguistics, and they discover that this is what they want to do. In my case, when I started university studies, I was not very sure what I wanted to do. I was thinking about maybe Psychology… I wasn't really sure, but the only open option at the university - it was a very difficult period in my country at the time -, was to do Philology and Literature. In the program for Philology and Literature, in the first semester, there was a course of Introduction to Linguistics that was mandatory, and I think that after the second class I decided that this was exactly what I wanted to do with my life. So, it arrived in a certain way. Maybe if I had my initial wish of going into the Faculty of Psychology fulfilled, I would have never met Linguistics at this very early time but, well, it was a chance meeting and at the same time a defining meeting because it took me just a week to decide that Linguistics was what I wanted to devote my life to.

Throughout your career you have been working in different universities, Universidad de la República, in Uruguay, University Paris 8, University of Strasbourg, Free University of Berlin. How has that experience influenced your research and teaching?

Well - I think I was very lucky in moving around a lot -, and I think that this diversity of institutions where I was first trained and then where I taught essentially helped me to acquire or to conserve a certain flexibility in the way of doing things, and just trying in my personal practice to get the best things out of the different systems and of the different traditions. I think that changing places is always an opportunity for learning, and it is a good thing to keep learning all your life. So the main point I would like to underline is that this sort of travelling around, being sort of a travelling scholar for so many years contributed to this flexibility – in addition to the fact of having the chance of meeting very interesting people and having made friends with many colleagues across the world. Every system has some very good points and some points that maybe are not so good, so, if you have the chance to try and combine the best aspects of the things you have seen, you can count yourself very lucky.

Although you work mainly in Semantics, many of your publications establish an interface with Syntax. How necessary do you consider this interface to be? Do you think that some semantic issues can only be fully described with the help of Syntax?

This is really a very good question because personally - and this is a very personal opinion on the development of the discipline of Formal Semantics - I think that the huge step forward made by Formal Semantics in the last decades of the past century was determined by the necessity of applying a compositional conception of semantics and, of course, if you are trying to do a compositional analysis in Semantics, you can only do it on the basis of syntactic structures. So, in a way, work on Semantics presupposes work on Syntax, even if sometimes it is perfectly possible that it is Semantics that decides between two alternative syntactic analyses that may be, let's say, competitors. Sometimes semantic considerations can lead you to prefer one analysis over the other. It is not so that Semantics does not influence Syntax, there is really an interface between the two. I could not think of my work without this convergence between Syntax and Semantics and I think that the main progress made in the past decades was because of this decidedly compositional view of Semantics. Let me just give you a historical example of the way in which this convergence works. This is about an important impulse for the development of both Formal Semantics and Syntax around the 80s. Two theories became popular, one in Semantics and one in Syntax. In principle, they were independent from one

another but there was a very clear convergence: the emergence, on the semantic side, of Generalized Quantifier Theory and, on the syntactic side, of the DP Hypothesis. These two hypotheses began to get some popularity more or less at the same time, they were arrived at by totally independent considerations, but it was an example of a very big convergence. The motivations were different but this convergence between Syntax and Semantics, in my view, was decisive both for the development of Formal Semantics and for the development of Syntax. It was a lucky coincidence, so to say, that the DP hypothesis and Generalized Quantifier Theory both emerged at the same time.

Much of your research has been focused on problems of tense, aspect and modality, and the interaction between them. How important is that interaction to the interpretation of the overall sentence and its meaning?

I think that this interaction is of crucial importance for the determination of the semantic value of any sort of clausal construction. I think that the last 40 years have also witnessed huge progress in the way of understanding this interaction, in part thanks to the combined work of Formal Linguistics, on the one side, and Descriptive and Typological Linguistics on the other side. In a way, the basic ideas regarding the interaction between Tense and Aspect, on the one side, and Tense and Modality, on the other side, were already there very early in David Dowty's dissertation, but the progress made afterwards, I think, depends mainly on a sort of widening of the empirical basis for the analysis. This widening, this enlarging of the empirical basis was made by trying to apply what people like Dowty had done for English to other languages with different configurations, with different particular morphological configurations and so the examination of these other sorts of languages led to reformulate some of the problems in a much more fine-grained and sophisticated form. For instance, the importance of grammatical aspect. It took a long time to understand how important the grammatical aspect is and the fact that the grammatical aspect and the temporal structure of situations are two different things. It took a long time to process this, and it also took a long time to process the interactions between Modality and Temporality, which is something I think that we have started more or less to understand in the last 10 to 15 years. It seems that there quite general principles, at least two of them, which we should pay attention to when trying to assess interactions between Temporality and Modality. For instance, the fact that all reference which is to a point in time after the evaluation point is necessarily modal. I think this has been established by now, but Dowty speaks already about that by the end of the 70s. However, the importance of this I think has

only dawned upon us in the last 15 years. And also, as I said, the distinction between Aspect in the sense of the temporal structure of the situation and Aspect as point of view, it also took a rather long time to understand how it really works, but the very interesting thing for me is that the main ideas, which are really the basic ideas, in quite a sketchy form, were already there in Dowty's dissertation.

One of the topics that you have been investigating is the semantics of the Perfect. In one of your papers from 2010, you discuss mainly data from European Spanish and American varieties, but also from Brazilian Portuguese. First, we would like to ask you if you have looked into data from European Portuguese and, if so, whether you think that your explanation for the differences between Spanish and (Brazilian) Portuguese also apply to European Portuguese? Second, could you, please, give us an answer to the question that you pose in that article: How universal are Ibero-Americans Present Perfects?

I just looked very superficially at the data of European Portuguese, and I dare not say anything very precise in this regard. What I do remember is that Patricia Amaral had some work particularly on the European Portuguese usage of the present prefect, which was very useful for me at the time of elaborating these papers. However, the question that arises for me now is the following: are the data for Brazilian Portuguese and for European Portuguese so very different, or aren't they? I formulate this question because it seems to me that Brazilian Portuguese has a lot of internal variation, concerning this particular point, the usage and the semantics of the present perfect. So, I wonder if perhaps some Brazilian Portuguese varieties are rather near to European Portuguese varieties. When I worked on this with Patricia Cabredo Hofherr, we were doing work on a very specific variety of Brazilian Portuguese that is spoken in the extreme northeast of Brazil. When I look at the data from our consultant today, 15 years after we did this research, I still think that the acceptability judgments and the observations of our consultant were very consistent, very coherent and they are plausible, but they do not coincide with what other speakers from Southern and central varieties of Brazilian Portuguese tell us. So, I wonder, since there is this important variation across Brazilian varieties, maybe the possible differences with European Portuguese are not larger than the internal variation in Brazilian Portuguese. I have to stress this, Brazilian Portuguese does not behave as a unit; there is a lot of diversity there. And regarding the second question, which is very interesting, as to the universality of the present perfects in American Spanish... I would say not American Spanish because there is a lot of internal variation in American Spanish. What I think is a little bit better known is the

Spanish in Mexico and the Spanish in Río de la Plata, and as far as the varieties for Mexico and Río de la Plata are concerned, we cannot say that the present perfects are universal because they do not always have the universal reading, they also have experiential readings. But there is something that is characteristic of these varieties, and it is the following: whenever the universal reading is possible, because of the set-up of the sentence, it is also obligatory. Whenever the universal reading emerges, it is also the only possible reading, the reading in which the described eventuality stretches up to the time of speech. In the American varieties, if the conditions are such that the universal reading may emerge, then you have the universal reading and you do not have the other, and this is quite different from the way European Spanish functions.

Another very interesting, but complex issue, is sequence of tenses, to which you have also been dedicating your investigation, in particular regarding constructions with the subjunctive embedded by clauses with attitude verbs. In a 2012 paper, you argue that studying the semantics of attitude verbs and temporal orientation can lead to a finer-grained universal typology of argument clauses and of the predicates that embed them. Bearing in mind that, as you point out in that paper, not all languages have a rich system of indicative and subjunctive tenses, don't you think that such a typology may be difficult to achieve?

Thank you for this question, it is a very interesting question, and you are right in pointing out that not every language has mood differences or mood contrasts reflecting a typology of complement clauses. But languages have other differences, for instance, in the type of complementizer they use. There are languages which have two or three different complementizers and these complementizers seem to be sensitive to the type of argument clause they are introducing. There are also differences if you think, for instance, of English. English does not have the subjunctive/indicative alternation anymore, but it has very clear patterns for finite and non-finite complementation. A particular type of subjunctive complement clause in the Romance Languages is reflected, in English, by non-finite complementation. Also, languages flag or code differences in the type of argument clause by means of independent or dependent temporal interpretations, or by the existence or non-existence of restructuring or transparency phenomena. So, all this indicates that some of the differences that seem flagged by subjunctive or indicative morphology in the Romance Languages have correlates, not mood correlates, but some other sort of syntactic correlates in other languages. There is a whole series of phenomena of morphosyntactic coding, and this series of phenomena of differential

morphosyntactic coding seems to be pointing to some big types, two or three types of argument clauses which seem to differ in the complexity of the functional architecture they have. On the other hand, I think that what I was *dreaming of* in this paper of 2012, this typology of argument clauses, has been developed in the meantime. It has already been developed in recent work by Susi Wurmbrand and her associates. Susi Wurmbrand and her team have developed a typology of complementation after work that Susi started with the study of restructuring in infinitival complementation, continued with her work on the typology of infinitival clauses and then continued for 20 years or more working on a very interesting subject, the typology of complement clauses in languages that lack infinitival complementation as some Slavic or Balkan languages. So, in a way, this typology of argument clauses, which I was dreaming of 10 years ago, has already been done and I'm very happy about it.

With respect to modality, knowing that this field has been widely investigated in the literature, and that many proposals of categorizations of types of modality have been put forward, why do you think that its categorization is not stabilized? What is, in your opinion, the factor that makes a theory or categorization become stable, or, at least, widely accepted?

This is a very hard question, and I will try to answer it in two different parts. First, with respect to modality, in contrast to what you suggest - and I understand why you suggested it - I do think that there is something rather stable concerning the categorization of modality and the stable part is that there is a consensus in the sense that there is a fundamental division between doxastic or epistemic modality on the one hand, and circumstantial or metaphysical modality, on the other hand. I think this basic twofold division, which has been in the field for the past 40 years, allows for a consensus that this is a real division and, on this point, there is not much variation among approaches. There is also the fact that this division has important correlates in a long series of phenomena, syntactic phenomena, but also semantic phenomena that have to do with interactions with temporality and temporal orientation. So, I think this part is stable and has been stable for some time. What is not stable and what appears as enormous diversity of tags and labels is what people have come to call modal flavors, and I'm very suspicious of an expression like modal flavor because, when you say modal flavors, what I think that you are insinuating is that you are not so clear that this division is really so relevant. Flavor gives you the idea of sort of variation, nuance, but not really hardwired differences. I think the problem with these labels, and, I mean, you probably have a list of 10 or 15 different labels for subcategories, particularly subcategories of circumstantial modality. For epistemic modality,

there are not so many, but for modality based on circumstantial modal bases it is true that you have lots of names, most of them of Greek origin. So, what is the problem? In my view, part of the problem, at least with the proliferation of labels and the difficulty one has to conceptualize this, is that one is trying to capture the substance, the stuff, the conceptual stuff of modality and probably for a linguist the conceptual stuff of modality or the conceptual substance of modality is not the most relevant thing. What is more important, in my view at least, are the formal properties of the modalities. And these formal properties are more abstract. The properties differentiating types of modality, they are more abstract, but there are not very many of them, there are three or four. They have been very well described, for instance in work by Condoravdi and her team. She has a magnificent introduction to formal approaches in modality dating from already 16 years ago or more and then you see what the formal differences may be in the way the modal basis and the ordering sources are structured, there are not so many. And I think that what is relevant for the linguist is the formal properties of the types of modalities and not if we say that it is anankastic, that it is deontic, that it is not really deontic, but it's a flavor… You see what I mean. And the second part, I will give a shot at answering it, but, of course, I don't have the full answer about what is necessary for theories and categorizations to reach a certain point of stability. The first thing is the fact that instability is to be expected because we are part of a program of research which, as all research programs, is a collective program, where many people have to collaborate or to give their best to try and solve the problems. So, research is essentially dynamic, research changes.

The problem is, of course, that when we start to work, or to do research, or to analyze with new tools a domain that has not been analyzed previously with these tools, what you do is that you just try. Everybody is just trying, just feeling his or her way along the concept or domain trying to say what we can do with this. The result of this is that a lot of proposals emerge, some of them incompatible, some of them perfectly compatible, but nobody takes much time to see that actually they are saying more or less the same thing, perhaps stressing different things, but more or less, the central ideas are the same. In the course of time, these proposals tend to converge and there is a sort of selection of a framework which becomes more or less the canonical framework for doing something and in general, and this is a good thing for the discipline, what emerges as a canonical framework is something much simpler than the initial proposals. And so probably what happens with modality nowadays and what has happened with modality for the past 10, 15 years, is that 10, 15 years ago we started massively to feel our way into the field but nowadays, at least the part I know best which is the part of interactions between modality

and temporality, there is a general framework which is emerging and which is much simpler than what we did 10 years before and which is more or less accepted by everybody, and this is a good point. This speaks of the health of a scientific discipline.

You have written extensively on the syntactic differences (mainly related to subjunctive clauses) between Standard Spanish and Uruguayan/Ibero-American Spanish. Can the findings of these studies be extended to other modern Romance languages and dialects, or are they processes that occur specifically in certain varieties of Spanish?

This question I think you can only answer on an individual basis, case by case, but, in a general way, what I could say is that it would be strange, and it would be quite unexpected if there were processes specific to a particular language, or to a particular variety. The examples I can think of now are specifically individual examples that I have been studying for the past years and they tend to be problems of semantics rather than of syntax. For instance, regarding the process of weakening of the sequence of tense in subjunctive clauses, I think it is not very risky to say that it is quite probable that a similar process already happened in French. What we see in the Rio de La Plata varieties of Spanish seems to be part of a change that in Modern French arrived at its logical conclusion in the twentieth century. So, what we find then for this Spanish variety is not something that is characteristic only for this Spanish variety, but we have another similar process. I haven't studied the process in French, I think nobody has studied it, at least, with *syntactically* more or less sophisticated tools but I think what we find in French is the logical conclusion of the same process that we find in Rio de La Plata Spanish nowadays. With respect to referring to future events and also to this curious phenomenon where a form which morphologically was first used to refer to things to come becomes an expression of uncertainty, whichever the temporal orientation of the situation you're speaking about, what I also found in my native Rio de La Plata variety, in collaborative work with Ana Maria Fălăuş was a very clear parallel of this in Romanian. In Romanian, the forms are not the same, they are simply differentiated by the form of the auxiliary. One auxiliary has the full form, the other has a reduced form, but what we find is that the distribution between the new form, for future reference, and the older form as a form of uncertainty in Rio de La Plata Spanish corresponded quite clearly to the difference in Romanian between what is called the future and what is called the presumptive future, which, as I said, is practically exactly the same form except that in the presumptive you have a reduction of the form of the auxiliary. So, this indicates that this is a phenomenon that we can find in another language, which happens to be a romance language,

but these two developments are independent of one another. And with respect to the other subject I have been studying lately, which has to do with the generalization of explicit marking for the progressive aspect in Spanish by the form *estar+gerund*, this happens more or less everywhere. We have seen it happen in English, but we have seen it happen also in Hindi and in a lot of other languages. So, really I do think that most of the things, at least as far as tense and aspect systems are concerned, that I have been able to find for some Spanish varieties have clear parallels in other languages and in other romance varieties, which makes the whole thing much more interesting.

Some of your works aim at establishing common characteristics between modern Romance languages, in particular Spanish, French and Romanian. From your perspective, what are the benefits of comparative studies?

First of all, let me state very clearly that I am fully convinced that you can practice Linguistics, do syntactic and semantic analysis, and be an excellent linguist only on the basis of a single language. I think this is perfectly possible because a single language gives you, in a way, already all that is necessary for us to understand how language works. So, it is perfectly possible to do it on the basis of a single language, and many excellent linguists work exclusively on a single language and even maintain that you can only work in a single language. But from my perspective, and given the way I have always worked, comparison between languages helps me, in particular as a person, to have a finer-grained perception of a phenomenon. It allows me to see that there are other possibilities of doing things. Sometimes, I for one have the tendency to keep entangled in the way one language applies a strategy to solve certain things and when you have other languages to compare, this gives you the possibility to see that this is not the only way, that for some things there is no "natural" way. Or they are all following the natural way but at a higher level of abstraction and what you have at a higher level of abstraction can manifest itself in different ways. In addition, I think it is important for us not to ignore the fact that there are different ways of solving problems linguistically. And there is another thing that I am really fully convinced of. As I told you, it is perfectly possible to do very good Linguistics on the basis of a single language, but I am also convinced that, both in Syntax and in Semantics, the great progress that has been made in the past four decades has been conditioned by this possibility of comparing what happens in different languages. That does not mean that a single linguist has to do two or more languages, but you have to be aware of and to study and learn what other linguists have said of other languages in parallel or similar cases.

Most modern Romance languages, Ibero-American Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese in particular, show a wide range of verb morphology variations. Some examples include the voseo in Argentine and Chilean Spanish and the lack of some plural forms in São Paulo dialects of Brazilian Portuguese. How up to date is Romance Linguistics with these language changes?

The particular phenomena you allude to in the question are very complex and actually they are much more extended than one could think in the particular vernacular varieties, and what I think is more important is that they have a history that is longer, and more complex than one can think. What happens with *voseo* and what happens with the plural, these are not very recent changes. Probably they have had a period of expansion in society, which is recent, but they probably take their origins in reorganizations of the system of address and of the system of number marking that have their roots as far back as the global expansion of the languages of the Iberian Peninsula. Probably the roots of the changes date back so far as that. And as for what Romance Linguistics is doing about it, I think that the discipline has always treated these phenomena, perhaps with a little more intensity in recent years, and all these phenomena as far as I know have their place in the major handbooks of Romance Linguistics that have been appearing in the past ten years, so I think Romance Linguistics is up to date.

How do you view the identity of the Spanish language as one of the most spoken in the world today? What are some interesting aspects that unite and differentiate the varieties?

I do not think I have anything very interesting to say about this, because I am not a full-born hispanist. I do Linguistics, I have always worked on Spanish because it is my native language, but that does not mean that I have the whole training of a hispanist in order to give a very sensible answer. One thing, out of personal experience, that I would like to mention as an answer to this question is that for many years I have thought, concerning the unity and the differences of Spanish, that Spanish was incredibly homogenous, given the geographical distances between its spoken varieties, and incredibly stable also historically. Part of this had to do with an ancient conception, quite typical for Spanish language policy, that there should not be too big a distance between spoken and written language. So, there is this tradition, which has been, in a way, facilitated by the fact that, since the Golden Century, the Spanish theatre has been a popular theatre which, on the one hand, contained elements of non-standard oral varieties and, on the other, also had a popular audience that could transmit that language. So, I

was always rather sure of this story, that what was peculiar about Spanish was that it was incredibly homogeneous and that part of this was due to this conception that oral and written language should not diverge too much from each other and part of it was due to the theater in the history of Spanish language having played such a very important role. Nowadays, when I am really studying variation in Spanish - and you can do it much better nowadays because of all the accessible corpora, data that you did not have access to 15 years ago – I would say it is not so stable as that, and it is not so unitary as that. In a way, my personal view is that the Spanish language is changing, it is much less homogeneous than we would like to think, but as I said, I am not a specialist.

Spanish is a pluricentric language whose varieties transcend continental frontiers. At the same time, we know that this phenomenon presents some challenges in the pedagogical framework, especially if we consider normative approaches. What are the main difficulties that you come across when teaching about Spanish language?

Actually, not many. The difficulties I have encountered were not having to deal with Spanish as a second language or anything like that. There were difficulties when I was caught unaware. I particularly remember an occasion in Barcelona where people in the audience were mainly speakers of northern Spanish in contact with Catalan, and we were discussing some examples in English, and I could not get the audience to agree with the judgements of acceptability or non-acceptability in the examples I had. So, I said "let's do it in Spanish!" and I translated it into Spanish and that was a disaster, because I was not aware of the fact that there was a certain type of adverbial that in peninsular Spanish, particularly in the northeastern varieties, was impossible to combine with the verb form I was using. So, the problems I have had in this sense were not with teaching Spanish as a foreign language because I think – and I am not a specialist on it either - there are mainly textbooks for Peninsular Spanish, on the one hand, and textbooks for American Spanish, on the other hand. And as it is normal, in Europe, you tend to use the textbooks based on Peninsular Spanish, and, in the United States and Canada, you tend to use the textbooks more for American Spanish. As long as you do not mix up things very much, this seems to work out rather well. The problem is for the deciders. The problem is for the people who have to decide what sort of variety to choose. But I guess there are numerous specialists for that.

Taking into account the complexity of the linguistic system that a pluricentric language suggests, what do you consider to be the fundamental principles for the elaboration of a descriptive Spanish grammar?

I think that, very fortunately and very happily, these principles - the principles that should be followed by a grammar of Spanish as a world language - have been really established and actually followed in the elaboration of the *Nueva Gramática de la Lengua Española*. This academy grammar was written in very close collaboration with all the corresponding academies of the Spanish-speaking world, so that practically every language academy of the Spanish speaking world had access to the materials and contributed to them. The result of this way of working is that this *Nueva Gramática* documents variation and diversity in all domains of grammar. For instance, if you look at the chapters devoted to the expression of the future and to the usage and semantics of the present perfect tense, they are really excellent chapters. They are exemplary, because what they do in this *Nueva Gramática* is to organize and structure all the variation that is known - and we know there is a lot of variation today - giving the information in a very reasoned, structured and also very objective and fine-grained way. At the same time, there is also this preoccupation for giving, whenever possible, an idea of the extension of certain regional phenomena, of the social levels or the registers of certain phenomena. So, I think that the principles that the grammar for a pluricentric language should follow have been actually followed in this grammar. The problem is that you can only do that in a work which is a reference work. You cannot do that in a textbook, for instance, because it is simply too much material. But I think these principles have already been formulated and followed very strictly in the *Nueva Gramática*.

As someone who is a teacher and has looked deeply into not only the structures of language but also how we learn them, in your opinion, what could be changed about the way we teach grammar and language in schools? More generally, what should change regarding how people view grammar and language in our day-to-day lives?

This is also a very interesting question. I have to refer to experiences that have been and are done mainly in Spain by Ignacio Bosque and his collaborators, who sort of have proposed and developed, during the years, a wholly new way of approaching the study of grammar and of approaching the interrelationships between what we do as descriptive or theoretical linguists and what of this has to go into the teaching of grammar at schools. I think they are exemplary in this work. I am mentioning Ignacio Bosque because he is more or less my own generation,

but there are younger people also like Ángel Gallego and the whole team he has built around him. I think the main point that they have is two things in the teaching of grammar: make it interesting and make people think, and not just analyze with a number of labels that have been learnt by heart. To make people think, to try to formulate problems. You can always formulate problems at different levels but, in general, small problems like "why can you say this and can't say this other thing?" Or "why when I say this, you understand this and if you reformulate it a little bit, you understand a completely different thing?" So, I think this is the way to go, to make grammar attractive and make it alive and make it the source of reasoning. The other thing is also for the teacher, but that takes up courage for the teacher, to be able to learn with the people you are teaching. And sometimes to be able to say "well, we don't have an explanation for that" or "we don't know how this works" and try to be as objective as possible and try not to - as all humans sometimes do - build a barrier of difficult words behind which we hide and behind which we feel more comfortable. In general, students respond very well to that. Also, Ignacio has developed an entirely new sort of exercising grammar which I am applying now at university and it is very good. It is the sort of exercise where you tell the people to build, for example, a sentence containing a headless relative which contains this and this as a subject, and this is an excellent type of exercise. Students love it because they are building something and it is also very difficult.

We couldn't help but notice that according to your CV, you can speak at least seven languages. Is language learning a fundamental, practical tool for a linguist, or do you see it as more linked with personal choices?

In my case, it was linked to personal choices. I always liked to learn new languages, and up to a certain age, I had a certain ease for learning new languages. But, as I said regarding a previous question, I think it is good if you can speak several languages, it is a good tool, but it is not a necessary condition for being a linguist. You can perfectly well be a monolingual linguist - which is something that I very much doubt because I do not think that an individual has only one single system. There is always a little bit of variation. The grammar you use when you speak to your next of kin is not the same grammar that you use when you speak in public. The grammar you use when you are with the people from the neighbourhood you were born in, or you live in is not the same grammar that you use in other locations. So, this idea of the monolingual individual I do not think is it very real. I cannot say anything very informed about that, but, in my opinion, even if we are officially monolingual because we only speak one

language, actually we are able to switch between very different grammars and I think that applies to every human being.

As someone who speaks and works with seven languages (such as Spanish, English, French, Portuguese, …) is there one language that is more challenging to work with, grammatically speaking? Why?

Hmm, no. *(laughter)*

Since you are fluent in many languages, what do you think about the concept of having one universal language in addition to your native tongue?

I think that in the contemporary world it is absolutely necessary to have a Lingua Franca. The earlier the people acquire this Lingua Franca the better it is. And I must say we already have it – it is English. I remember that 45 or 50 years ago, at a conference, people were discussing precisely about the possibilities of a Lingua Franca and what about invented languages and constructed languages and so on. An Austrian linguist, an anglicist, said on this occasion "look, we already have a universal language, it is Bad English". I think he was right, we need a universal language and the universal language is Bad English and it is okay.

As a researcher who has contributed so much to the scientific community, you must have certainly overcome several challenges, as well as celebrated moments of jubilation throughout your career. What are a few of the pivotal moments that shaped you into the linguist you are today?

This is a question that forces one to think back many years, but I will just try and choose maybe three moments. One of these three moments was probably the fact that I started to study linguistics when I was eighteen in Uruguay and that I had very good teachers who shaped my way of doing things. They were very rigorous people and very hardworking people. Then, there was a second period when I started my doctoral work. I did my doctoral work in Germany under the supervision of Eugenio Coseriu and the contact with Coseriu - who was a sort of universal mind, also very rigorous and extremely well informed and an extremely intelligent scholar - was also very important in my life. And then, the third moment that was crucial in shaping me into the linguist I am today was when I decided – I was already in my early thirties –, that what I wanted to do was actually being done in the United States, and I did not want to go to the United States, and in France. So, I went to France. I wanted to do Formal Semantics. I had read

Carlson's dissertation on *Reference to kinds in English* and Dowty's dissertation on *Word Meaning and Montague Grammar* and I decided that for the things that interested me the place to go in Europe was France. And so, I went there, in the beginning of the 1990s and it was a wonderful period because there was this very determined group of people who wanted to introduce as much of Formal Semantics as it was possible to introduce in France. We had reading groups with people who are now very important, we met every week, we discussed things, we thought "well, who can we invite in order to get some more information about this problem"… These were the years between 1994-1998. Anyway, they were the happiest years in my scientific life because you had this sense of being part of a new thing that was emerging and that was interesting. These are the three moments I like to remember.